

Message Text

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S E C R E T SECTION 1 OF 2 ADDIS ABABA 3934

DEPT PASS HORN OF AFRICA COLLECTIVE

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: MOPS, ET
SUBJ: ETHIOPIAN FORCES CAPTURE SABDERAT; POLITICAL IMPLICA-
TIONS OF THE PRESENT MILITARY SITUATION FOR THE
ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT

REF: ADDIS ABABA 3509

SUMMARY. ETHIOPIANS ANNOUNCE FURTHER MILITARY VICTORIES IN
SABDERAT AND TEKERERIT I AND II. THERE IS, HOWEVER, AN AP-
PARENT LOSS OF ETHIOPIAN MILITARY MOMENTUM IN ERITREA AND
THE MILITARY SITUATION IN THE OGADEN APPEARS TO BE WORSENING.
IF THE PRESENT ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT POLICY TOWARDS ERITREA
AND THE OGADEN WILL NOT LEAD TO A MILITARY SOLUTION TO THESE
CONFLICTS, IT APPEARS POSSIBLE THAT POLICY WILL HAVE TO BE
RE-EXAMINED. THE MOST LIKELY PROSPECTS FOR SUCH A POLICY
REVIEW WOULD BE EITHER FOR THE ETHIOPIANS TO TURN TO A HARD-
ER, MORE AGGRESSIVE LINE OR (IN ERITREA AT LEAST) TO SEEK A
MORE FLEXIBLE SOLUTION. THE IMPLICATIONS OF EITHER FOR THE
STABILITY OF THE ETHIOPIAN JUNTA AND FOR ITS EXTERNAL POLITI-
CAL ORIENTATION ARE SERIOUS AND SO FAR UNCERTAIN. END SUMMARY.

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1. THE ETHIOPIAN NATIONAL REVOLUTIONARY OPERATIONS COMMAND
(NROC) ANNOUNCED THE CAPTURE OF SABDERAT (15 27 N 36 39 E)
ON 2 SEPT 1978. SABDERAT IS LOCATED ABOUT 25 MILES NORTH OF
TESSENAI, CLOSE TO THE SUDANESE FRONTIER, AND IS A KEY TRAN-
SIT POINT FOR ERITREAN SUPPLIES FROM SUDAN. DUE TO THE LENGTH
OF THE ERITREAN-SUDANESE BORDER, HOWEVER, IT IS UNLIKELY
THAT THE CAPTURE OF SABDERAT WILL SERIOUSLY IMPEDE THE FLOW

OF SUPPLIES TO ERITREAN SECESSIONISTS.

2. IN THE SAME COMMUNIQUE NROC CLAIMED THE CAPTURE OF TAKE-RERIT I AND TEKERERIT II, 10 AND 15 MILES RESPECTIVELY NORTH OF AGORDAT (15 32 N 39 05 E) WHICH ITSELF WAS CAPTURED ON 9 AUG 1978 (REFTEL). THIS PLACES THE ETHIOPIAN FORCES WITHIN LONG RANGE ARTILLERY (130 MM) RANGE OF KEREN (15 47 N 38 38 E), THE LAST MAJOR TOWN HELD BY THE ERITREAN SECESSIONISTS AND ERITREAN PEOPLES' LIBERATION FRONT (EPLF) CAPITAL.

3. THE NROC COMMUNIQUE CLAIMED THE DESTRUCTION OF MORE THAN 100 ERITREANS IN THE FIGHTING FOR TEKERERIT I AND II, AND THE CAPTURE OR DESTRUCTION OF 22 LANDROVERS, 4 HEAVY DUTY TRUCKS, 75 DRUMS OF KEROSENE, 10 QUINTALS OF MILLET, 41 KILOS OF SUGAR AND 20 CASES OF MEDICINE. NROC COMMUNIQUE MADE NO MENTION OF WHETHER SABDERAT WAS DEFENDED. IT HAD IN THE RECENT PAST BEEN HELD BY ERITREAN LIBERATION FRONT (ELF) FORCES.

4. NROC CLAIMS MUST BE VIEWED CAUTIOUSLY AND THE PUBLICITY GIVEN THE CAPTURE OF SABDERAT AND TWO MINOR LOCATIONS SOUTH OF KEREN IS PROBABLY AN EFFORT ON THE PART OF THE ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT TO MAINTAIN THE MOMENTUM OF ITS PREVIOUS VICTORIES. THERE HAS BEEN A CLEAR LOSS OF THAT MOMENTUM, HOWEVER, AND IT IS DOUBTFUL WHETHER KEREN CAN BE TAKEN BEFORE THE 12 SEPT REVOLUTION DAY CELEBRATIONS. ELSEWHERE THE ETHIOPIAN POSITION IS NONE TOO BRIGHT. ALTHOUGH CONVOYS WITH HEAVY MILITARY ES-
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CORTS ARE ABLE TO TRAVEL THE ROADS BETWEEN ERITREAN CITIES CAPTURED BY THE ETHIOPIANS, UNESCORTED TRAFFIC IS NOT POSSIBLE AND THE ETHIOPIANS ARE SO FAR UNABLE TO PREVENT THE FREE TRANSIT OF ERITREAN AND OTHER GUERRILLAS AND THEIR SUPPLIES AND EQUIPMENT ACROSS THE COUNTRYSIDE. EMBASSY HAS SEEN REPORTS THAT THERE IS STILL HEAVY FIGHTING BETWEEN ETHIOPIAN FORCES AND ERITREANS IN TESSENEI AND SOMALI GOVERNMENT BACKED WESTERN SOMALI LIBERATION FORCES (WSLF) IN THE OGADEN ARE APPARENTLY HARASSING CONVOYS AND ATTACKING OUTPOSTS AT WILL. IT SHOULD BE NOTED THAT ETHIOPIAN GARRISONS IN THE OGADEN, WHERE IT HAS BEEN POSSIBLE TO REESTABLISH THEM, ARE MANNED AT APPROXIMATELY TEN TIMES PRE-SOMALI INVASION LEVELS. THE COST OF MAINTAINING THESE GARRISONS FOR A COUNTRY AS POOR AS ETHIOPIA IS NOT NEGLIGIBLE, AND PRESUPPOSES A CONTINUING STEADY FLOW OF MILITARY SUPPLIES.

NOTE BY OC/T: NOT PASSED ABOVE COLLECTIVE.

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5. SINCE THE ETHIOPIAN OFFENSIVE IN ERITREA BEGAN MANY TOWNS HAVE BEEN RECAPTURED WHICH COULD REDOUND TO THE POLITICAL ADVANTAGE OF THE ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT IF IT CHOOSES TO USE ITS VICTORIES POLITICALLY AND IF THE ERITREANS NOW BELIEVE THAT THE SITUATION FOR THEM CAN ONLY GET WORSE. TO DATE WE HAVE NO INDICATIONS THAT EITHER IS THE CASE. MILITARY ACTIVITY THROUGHOUT ERITREA APPARENTLY REMAINS AT A HIGH LEVEL AND ACTION IN THE OGADEN IS APPARENTLY INCREASING. THE PACE OF ETHIOPIAN MILITARY ADVANCES SEEMS TO BE SLOWING IN ERITREA AND IS NOT EVIDENT IN THE OGADEN WHERE THE INITIATIVE LIES WITH THE WSLF. THE POLITICAL EFFECT OF THIS SITUATION WITHIN THE ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT IS STILL NOT CLEAR, BUT IT WOULD BE REASONABLE TO EXPECT THAT THREE TENDENCIES MIGHT DEVELOP: A) THOSE WHO WOULD FAVOR NEGOTIATED SETTLEMENTS (AT LEAST IN ERITREA); B) THOSE WHO WOULD FAVOR AN EVEN HARDER, MORE AGGRESSIVE POLICY, PERHAPS INCLUDING MORE DIRECT ACTION AGAINST SUPPLY LINES AND SUPPLIERS; AND C) THOSE WHO WOULD CONTINUE THE MILITARY EFFORT AT ABOUT THE PRESENT LEVEL IN THE HOPE THAT SOMEHOW THE SITUATION WILL IMPROVE (NOT PERHAPS THE MOST REALISTIC OPTION AND ONE WE DOUBT CAN CONTINUE TO MAINTAIN ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT SUPPORT FOR LONG).

6. IF THE ANALYSIS ABOVE IS CORRECT, WE CAN EXPECT A CHANGE IN THE ETHIOPIAN GOVERNMENT'S PRESENT POLICIES TOWARDS
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ERITREA AND PERHAPS SOMALIA WITHIN A RELATIVELY SHORT TIME. ANY CHANGE WOULD HAVE VERY SERIOUS REPERCUSSIONS WITHIN THE PROVISIONAL MILITARY ADMINISTRATIVE COUNCIL (PMAC OR DIRG) AND COULD LEAD BOTH TO INCREASED INTERNAL INSTABILITY AND

TO AN UNCERTAIN SITUATION FOR THE EXTERNAL POLITICAL ORIENT-
ATION OF THE GOVERNMENT.
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